DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 334 727 EC 300 462

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TITLE Gifted Education: An Overview and Critique.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 23p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Delivery Systems; Educational History; *Educational Philosophy; Educational Practices; Elementary Secondary Education; Elitism; Expectation; *Gifted; Instructional Effectiveness; Special Classes; *Special Programs; Student Needs

ABSTRACT

This paper briefly outlines the history of gifted education programs and identifies factors working against gifted education. It describes gifted program options and presents arguments for and against each option. The paper then presents the arguments of several critics outside the gifted education field who severely criticize the very presence of programs for the gifted. These argument focus on such beliefs as racial inequalities caused by gifted programs, lack of increased achievement, use of cooperative learning as a substitute for gifted education, and negative impact of gifted programs on the education of average and below average students. The counterargument is then made that special classes for gifted students do not create a culture where less is expected of and provided for students who are not gifted; rather, that these lowered expectations are caused by teachers who are uninterested in teaching and stimulating students. It is concluded that teachers can teach students at any ability level using creative instructional methods, critical thinking, and outside resources to stimulate the learning process. (Includes 26 references.) (JDD)

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Gifted Education: An Overview and Critique

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A historical perspective: Ever since Lewis Terman and his colleagues began studying gifted individuals in the 1920's, educators of the gifted have been faced with the challenge of dispelling myths concerning this population. The results of Terman's forty year study of gifted students challenged prevalent conceptions that gifted students were socially and emotionally unstable. He showed that many talented individuals went on to achieve great things, were highly motivated, and persistent. The Soviet Union's successful launch of *Sputnik* in 1958 brought the nation's attention to improving achievement in math, science, and engineering. And in the decade following *Sputnik*, much research was conducted on improving programs for the gifted and talented in the hope that these students would put the United States back in the technological lead. A few years later in 1972, Sidney Marland, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, published a study of programs available for the gifted and talented, known as the Marland Report.

> The report suggested that gifted youth were left to languish or go unserved in American schools. . . [It] had a monumental effect in establishing a new definition of the gifted: Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and services beyond those provided by the regular school program in order to realize their

> contribution to self and society (Feldhusen, VanTassel-Baska, Seeley, 1989, p. 4).

Marland's report also broadened the categories in definition of giftedness to include not only academic aptitude, but also creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts, and psychomotor ability. In the seventies and eighties, due to the establishment of an office of gifted education in the U.S. Office of Education, gifted programs grew and prospered. In recent years, however, gifted education has come under attack by individuals who incorrectly believe that since gifted children are talented, they can take care of themselves without any differentiated curriculum or programming. These individuals ignore the abundant evidence showing that gifted children, without proper encouragement or programming, do not develop their talents.

Factors working against gifted education: Gifted education is similar to other special education in that it attempts to meet the educational needs of a distinct population. However, gifted programs are not covered under the umbrella of public law 94-142, which requires that all children regardless of disability are entitled to a free and appropriate education, or any other federal law. In addition, "only half of the states mandate programs for the gifted under special education legislation" (Tammi, 1990, p. 6). Dr. John F. Feldhusen, distinguished professor of Education at Purdue University, when asked about the recent trends in gifted education indicated that gifted educators are in a defensive posture, hanging on desperately to what services they have, not daring to ask for additional funds for expansion of services. This defensive posture seems to be the result of three factors. First, "many educators and policy makers wrongly believe that gifted students need no help in developing their talent,

and that, because of their exceptional . . . abilities, they rarely suffer from emotional difficulties" (Tammi, 1990, p. 6). But, gifted educators contend, "the fundamental problem of the gifted and talented is that they do not get instruction which fits their characteristics and needs" (Feldhusen, 1989b, p. 55). Senator Sederburg, in a 1984 report in the Michigan School Board Journal, says that while it is essential that we demand that students possess essential skills when they graduate from high school, ". . .we must not overlook the student who is not challenged by such minimal objectives" (p. 24). He adds that for the last twenty years, legislation and monies have been funneled into programs for students who are disadvantaged academically and economically, and now it is time to balance the scales and serve the needs of those who are gifted and talented. In systems where gifted programs exist, a second factor limits the effectiveness of them. Feldhusen, Moon, and Rifner stated the problem as follows:

> Too many of the people struggling to design and implement programs for gifted students have a narrow and tenuous grasp of the field; and, when they have done their homework, they are often hamstrung by administrators who are *un* informed, *mis* informed, *dis* interested, or financially *un* able to support the plan (1989, p. 50).

Chuska (1989) reports that many teachers and administrators who are involved in setting up programs for the gifted admit to not doing ". . . much in-depth study and/or [having] . . .much instruction about giftedness and gifted education" (p. 6) . Third, programs for the gifted are being attacked by those who believe that the students are

receiving preferential treatment. They contend that all students should have access to the information and facilities that gifted students do.

To understand the problems educators of the gifted face in order to retain programs for the highly able, one must have knowledge of what program options are available for gifted students, what benefits and deficiencies gifted educators themselves see in those programs, and what the critics outside of gifted education have to say.

Gifted program options: Because programs for the gifted and talented are not mandated by federal law, it is up to each state to decide to what extent it will provide services for this population. Program options for the gifted and talented therefore cover a broad spectrum ranging from classes which offer no differential treatment for gifted learners, to full time gifted and talented classes taught by specially trained teachers. The four commonly recognized placement options for gifted and talented students are: regular class placement, pull-out/resource room, cluster grouping, and self-contained gifted classes.

Gifted students remain in regular classrooms when there is an absence of programs for them in a school district. The gifted student receives no special services, and the regular classroom teacher generally has no special training in gifted education. Therefore the gifted student receives little, if any, of a curriculum designed for gifted learners. Only if the teacher uses individualized instruction, in which subject matter is prescribed for each student at a rate appropriate to his/her abilities, will the gifted student receive accelerated or enriched materials.

While regular class placement of gifted students focuses no special attention on

their giftedness, pull-out/resource room programs address students' giftedness for one or two hours per week. Belcastro (1987) defines pull-out/resource room programs as ". . . placement of intellectually gifted students in heterogeneous classrooms for most of their instruction but removing them to form a homogeneous class for a small part of their instruction" (p. 208). The resource room teacher may or may not be required to have an endorsement in teaching gifted students, depending on the district's guidelines. The curriculum in these classes typically focuses on thinking and problem solving skills, and is rarely connected to the students' regular class content.

Cluster grouping, unlike pull-out/resource room programming, groups the gifted students together for the whole school day. However, they do not necessarily receive instruction that is tailored to their needs. Feldhusen defines cluster grouping as having ". . . all of the identified [gifted] youth at a grade level . . . assigned to one [otherwise heterogeneous] classroom in a school" (p. 1). It is recommended that the teacher who receives the gifted cluster have some coursework or an endorsement in gifted education. Also recommended are supplementary materials specifically designed for gifted students. Neither of these recommendations are compulsory.

Self-contained gifted classes, unlike program options mentioned above, have gifted students grouped homogeneously for all academic subjects, all day, in their own classroom. Generally, the gifted students in a self-contained program are mainstreamed with those of the same age for art, PE, lunch, recess, music, assemblies, and other such activities. The teacher in a self-contained gifted class is usually equipped with an endorsement in gifted education, and uses curriculum and materials designed specifically for gifted students.

Arguments for and against gifted programs: Of the four program options mentioned, regular classroom placement, pull-out/resource room, and self-contained gifted classes are the most commonly used methods for reaching gifted students. Each of these options has positive and negative aspects.

The main benefit of placing gifted students in the regular classroom is that the administration is relieved of the financial burden of paying for special materials, specialized instruction, and an additional classroom. Some feel justified in their decision not to give priority to gifted education because they ". . . have assumed that bright students could prosper within the framework of the normal academic program" (Cox, Daniel, & Boston, 1985, p. i). However, Cox et al. (1985) go on to say that "this point of view either ignored the need of these students for challenges commensurate with their abilities or assumed that they would be self-starters who would find individual ways to reach beyond basic requirements" (p. i). Experts in the field of gifted education agree that gifted students' needs are not being met in the regular classroom, and in some cases, achievement actually declines. Feldhusen explains why gifted students' needs are neglected in the regular classroom:

> Gifted and talented children complain a great deal about the boredom of their [regular]classroom experiences. . . [they] are forced to spend a lot of time being taught things they already know, doing repetitive drill sheets and activities, and receiving instruction on new material at too slow a pace (1989a, p. 9).

This insufficient intellectual challenge leads to lack of motivation and interest, and,

eventually, a decline in achievement. In addition, teachers who must teach a diverse group of students face severe management problems. Gifted students who finish their work early become restless and need enrichment materials, while slower students struggle to keep up with the rest of the class and need extra help to complete the assignment. Although individualization seems to be one answer to this problem there is limited evidence to support its effectiveness for gifted learners.

Among programs designed specifically for gifted learners, the pull-out/resource room is the most widely used. In one survey of schools with gifted programs, seventy percent indicated they used the pull-out/resource room model. One benefit of a resource room for gifted students is that achievement gains do occur. Educators of the gifted believe achievement increases are due to a number of factors unique to pull-out programs. First, a teacher in a resource room can focus on one group of learners within a small range of ability. The teacher can then utilize teaching strategies and materials that are specifically designed for gifted learners. Second, as Cox et al. (1985) state, the programs are ". . . highly visible and easily evaluated" (p. 43). Since all the gifted students are being served by one teacher in one classroom, administrators can have quality and content control over what is being taught. Third, the administrative needs for a resource room are limited. One teacher serves all the gifted students in one or several buildings, and just one classroom in each building is utilized for part of one day a week. Since the physical needs of the program are limited, it is a cost effective program for a school system.

Although the pull-out/resource model for gifted programming has benefits, gifted educators have valid concerns with the approach. McDaniel (1990) claims that

> all too often. . . once a school district implements a pullout model, it considers its full obligation to the gifted to be met. . . The accompanying reliance on the pullout as the sole accomodation for the gifted can create problems which produce valid criticism of the model. (p. 10)

McDaniel and others agree that the pull-out/resource room program should be used as a stepping stone to a more comprehensive program for gifted students, and should not be an end in itself. When the pull-out model is the sole means for educating gifted learners in a school, problems arise for teachers and students. First, the pull-out program is rarely coordinated with what is happening in the students' regular classrooms. Gifted students may be learning valuable skills in the areas of problem solving and thinking skills in the resource room, but they're learning it apart from the rest of their content-area curriculum. For example, there would be no mediated transfer between scientific thinking skills developed in a resource class and content learned in a regular science class. Second, since the students have to physically leave their regular classrooms to attend special classes, there is a heightened awareness of their being special, increasing the chance of being ridiculed and ostracized by their classmates. Third, students in resource classes are usually expected to make up the work they missed while absent from their regular class, making the resource room seem more like a penalty than a necessity. Finally, gifted students still must spend the majority of the school day in their regular classrooms and face the aforementioned problems associated with it.

Given the problems with the pull-out/resource model, it is perhaps no surprise

that research does not support the use of it. Kulik and Kulik (1987) state that ". . . we have been unable to find statistical support for conclusions that grouping programs are most effective when they are done for only one or two subjects"(p. 29). Also, Cox et al. (1985) criticize the model as being ". . . a patchwork approach to serving the gifted, a part-time solution to a full-time problem" (p. 9). She and her collegues think ". . . it is a model whose time has come - and gone" (Cox, et al., 1985, p. 45).

In contrast, the benefits of a self-contained gifted class are seen as crucial by leaders in the field of gifted education. Most importantly, ". . . grouping by ability produces a positive attitude toward subject matter for all groups of learners" (VanTassel-Baska, Willis, Meyer, 1989, p. 6). It is well-documented that gifted students, when not in the company of other gifted students, often feel that they must suppress their enthusiasm for learning in order to save face with their peers. However, when gifted students are grouped together for instruction, it ". . . provides a mileu or environment in which gifted. . . youth can experience instruction with peers who accept them as they are, who will not ridicule or ostracize them" (Feldhusen, 1991, p. 2). The level of acceptance present in a self-contained class allows gifted students to blossom emotionally and academically, using their abilities to their fullest without fear of alienating peers.

Besides the emotional benefits of a self-contained gifted class, notable academic gains are present as well. Kulik and Kulik (1987), in their study of student achievement in self-contained gifted classes, found that achievement increased by .62 standard deviations for gifted learners versus a .06 standard deviation gain for gifted learners in programs not designed specifically for gifted students. These academic

gains occur due to the teacher's capacity to match the level of material to the students' abilities for every subject all day. Gifted students are then challenged by their work and peers to achieve greater academic gains.

Teachers have expressed concern that removing the gifted students from regular classrooms leaves the class void of leadership and positive role models to motivate lower achieving students. In response, gifted educators balk at the assumption that gifted students should be used as motivators. This role belongs to the classroom teacher, not the gifted students. Also, Schunk ". . . has found that children model other children who are of similar ability to themselves and who are coping well with some aspects of the school situation. Thus, in most cases, children of low or average ability will not model the gifted" (Feldhusen, 1991, p. 3). With the absence of intellectual dominance by gifted students, average and low-average students can assume new roles as leaders in their classes, a clear benefit.

Another criticism of self-contained gifted classes is that gifted classes are elitist. Since gifted classes single out one population to receive special services, the argument goes, other populations are excluded from receiving special treatment. In response, Tammi, discussing elitism in gifted education, makes an analogy between gifted classes and athletics. "Not all students have the ability or the desire to participate on a varsity sports team, yet I have never heard any school official argue that singling out talented athletes for team membership to the exclusion of others is elitist" (Tammi, 1990, p. 6). Gifted students, like impaired children, athletes, and musicians, need special, different training than those not able or interested in those areas in order to reach their full potential. In one study of a self-contained gifted

program, parents were surveyed to find out if they felt the programming was encouraging elitism in their children. These

> parents felt that the program not only did not foster elitism in their children, but that the opposite was occurring. In the regular classes. . . their children were more aware of their superior intellectual abilities as compared to average or below average children. This was often exacerbated by teachers who singled the children out for special favors and activities. . .the regular program made their children less tolerant of others (Hoover, 1985, p. 128).

Gifted programs are elitist when they offer perks such as more or better equipment, or more field trips. But gifted programming does not necessarily have to lead to elitism. Students with high ability deserve special programs just as students with mental and physical impairments do. As mentioned earlier, it has been shown that just because students are gifted, does not mean that they have the ability to self-direct their intellectual capabilities. They need guidance to be able to use their capabilities, just like any student population.

Critics of gifted education: Up to this point, the arguments for and against various gifted education programs by educators in the field have been given. However, there are those outside of the gifted education field that severely criticize the very presence of programs for the gifted. Two vocal opponents of gifted education are Robert Slavin, the Co-Director of the Elementary Program, Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students at Johns Hopkins University, and Jeannie Oakes, a social scientist with the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica, California.

Slavin proposes changing the regular classroom to accommodate the gifted instead of providing special services for them. According to Slavin (1986), ". . . ability grouping goes against our democratic ideals by creating academic elites" (p. 10). He supports this argument by stating that all classes should expose students to different races, socioeconomic levels, and abilities. Slavin (1986) claims further that since gifted classes are disproportionately made up of white, middle class students with higher mental capabilities, they ". . . serve to increase divisions along class, race, and ethnic group lines" (p. 10). In addition to racial inequalities caused by gifted programs, Slavin believes that grouping by ability does not increase achievement . He states that evidence from two studies ". . . clearly indicates that assigning students to self-contained classes according to general achievement or ability does not enhance student achievement in the elementary school" (Slavin, 1986, p. 74). Lastly, Slavin supports the use of cooperative learning to address the differing abilities present in a heterogeneous classroom. He claims that "high achievers gain in particular from cooperative learning because of the routine opportunity to explain to groupmates what they have just learned, which. . . builds deeper understanding in the explainer" (Slavin, 1990, p. 6).

Slavin claims that gifted classes are racially discriminatory, do not increase achievement, and that cooperative learning can be used in the regular classrooms as a substitute for gifted programs. However, these conclusions can be challenged. First, the disproportionate number of white, middle class students in gifted programs is not the fault of the gifted class per se, but the fault of the identification process that put them there. Educators of the gifted agree that ". . . serious problems remain in

identifying giftedness, especially in finding talent among children from poverty and minority backgrounds" (Feldhusen, 1989a, p. 7). They are, however, developing testing models which can detect talent in disadvantaged children. Feldhusen stated that the majority of research grants in gifted education today are given for the study of identifying giftedness in disadvantaged and underachieving children.

In addition, the studies Slavin cited to support his claim that self-contained ability grouping did not increase achievement did not include programs that were designed specifically for gifted or low ability students. If there is no differentiation of curriculum, then grouping by ability is pointless. Simply putting children of similar ability together without meeting specific needs has been shown by educators to have little affect on achievement. But that is not what gifted programming does. Classes for gifted children use differentiated curriculum, designed specifically for gifted students and their needs. As mentioned earlier, Kulik and Kulik (1987) found that ". . . programs designed for all students in a grade had significantly lower effects" (p. 28) than programs designed with a specific ability group in mind. Achievement increased only .06 standard deviations for students grouped by ability with no specialized curriculum versus a .62 standard deviation gain for programs designed specifically for gifted students.

Lastly, Slavin's claim that cooperative learning is a viable substitute for gifted programming has not been proven by research. Robinson (1990) contends that

> if students are spending their time learning basic skills at a modest pace or are spending the majority of their time reviewing and teaching these skills to others, they will not

> have time to engage in other kinds of instructional experiences which are important to their development (p. 34).

Gifted students should not be burdened with the task of teaching less able students when they could be moving beyond material already mastered.

Another opponent of gifted education, Jeannie Oakes, believes that the mere existence of gifted programs, particularly in the practice of tracking in middle and high schools, is undermining the education of average and below average students. Her stand against gifted education is two-pronged. First, she believes that gifted programming is based on invalid assumptions, and second, that its existence causes unequal education for students with average or below average IQ.

Oakes claims that gifted educators make many incorrect assumptions when arguing for the existence of gifted programs. She says that gifted educators cannot assume that grouping students by similar ability will improve achievement, that students can be fairly placed, and that ability grouping will lighten a teacher's load. In addition, she states that gifted educators cannot presume that lower ability students will suffer emotionally because of the presence of gifted students in their classrooms, and that differences in ability cannot be handled in a regular classroom setting.

In addition to the claim that gifted education is based on fallacious assumptions, Oakes believes that it does not allow access to equal education for all students. Gifted education, she claims, "... has historically restricted both access to education and achievement of ethnic minority and poor children" (Oakes, 1986c, p. 61). She also believes that "... high status knowledge is equally important for all" (Oakes, 1986c, p. 74), and that gifted programs control and limit the accessibility to that knowledge by

excluding those deemed less able. By limiting the information students in non-gifted programs encounter, she believes that students in lower tracks are being discriminated against because they will never have access to the ". . . knowledge our society values most" (Oakes,1986a, p. 16). Fernstermacher concurs and adds "[I]t is possible that some students may not benefit equally from unrestricted access to knowledge, but this fact does not entitle us to control access in ways that effectively prohibit what Dewey called 'the funded capital of civilization" (Oakes, 1986a, p. 15). She proposes that "students who are identified as *less able* are often those who have less, both socially and economically (1986b, p. 152), and that educators should therefore look to other factors such as family background, motivation, and self-concept to discover what influences IQ.

Although Oakes says that gifted educators make many assumptions that are not substantiated, she fails to give empirical evidence to support her claim. In fact, research has shown the assumptions to be valid. First, as mentioned earlier, grouping by ability in addition to differentiated curriculum not only improves achievement, but also the gifted student's attitude toward learning. Second, although her claims that identification procedures do not fairly place students have been true in the past, gifted educators are striving to right that wrong. Major studies are being undertaken, and books are being written in order to improve the identification process for gifted students who are underachievers or disadvantaged. Third, Oakes claims that gifted educators cannot assume that the presence of gifted classes will lighten the regular classroom teacher's work load. Although no specific research has been done on the subject, one can logically surmise that if the range of abilities in a classroom is

diminished, the amount of preparation time will be decreased as well. There would be no need to prepare enrichment activities for the gifted students who would invariably be finished with classwork sooner than most of the class. That time could be used to improve instruction and materials for the rest of the class. Fourth, Oakes says gifted educators cannot assume that students of lower ability will suffer emotionally because of the presence of gifted students in their classrooms. However, in one study, it was found that 66% of teachers surveyed felt that average and below average students had better chances to respond and, "... 45% of teachers reported... that their classrooms were more effective places to learn for other students when the gifted were removed... The classroom successes of the gifted... are not a source of joy for other youth" (Feldhusen, 1991, p. 3). Fifth, unlike educators of the gifted, Oakes believes that differences in ability can be dealt with in the regular classroom. She mentions briefly the use of cooperative learning to achieve this goal, but does not give any research to support this claim. She also mentions structuring curriculum around ideas and themes, and claims "with such a concept-based approach to curriculum, the range of skill differences becomes a far less formidable obstacle to teaching and learning" (Oakes, 1986b, p. 152). However, Oakes goes no further to describe how this approach would serve all ability levels in a classroom. It is this author's opinion that Jeannie Oakes needs to support her claims with specific empirical evidence, and offer viable, proven, and practical alternatives before gifted educators should take her concerns seriously. (She and Martin Lipton, in *Making the Best of Schools*, offer some practical advice for putting her ideas into practice, but her suggestions in the articles cited were vague and unprovable.)

A dangerous dichotomy: Oakes' (and Slavin's) belief that gifted education does not allow equal access to quality education for all students is based on a definition of ability that most educators of the gifted do not subscribe to. Oakes (1986b) states her opinion of ability when she says: "just as the implicit assumption that some students can't or won't learn underlies the practice of tracking, so the belief that all students can and will learn underlies the successful implementation of heterogeneous grouping" (p. 152). Oakes and many others believe that ability is not something that you are born with, it is something that is developed and nurtured by the circumstances that one is brought up in. According to this view, any child could be gifted or learning disabled, depending on the environments he or she is exposed to in home and school. And since the quality of the learning environment determines ability, programs that provide enrichment to those that have been deemed more able neglect those that did not have the benefit of a quality learning environment earlier in life. The natural conclusion for Oakes and others is that gifted programming is discriminatory and should be abandoned.

Educators of the gifted, on other hand, believe that ability is innate. People are born with abilities in certain areas and disabilities in others. Although the environment one grows up in can determine the extent to which talent is developed, it is not the sole determiner of ability. Educators of the gifted come to the conclusion that gifted programming is a necessity to develop the talents of those blessed with them, and that "eliminating [them] . . . is as unethical as eliminating programs for the retarded" ("Issues," 1990, p. 7).

As long as educators hold contradictory beliefs about the nature of ability, they

will have conflicting beliefs about how that ability is to be nurtured. Those who believe that ability is the result of environment will continue to fight programs that they believe discriminate against those who are disadvantaged. Those who believe that ability is innate, and that it is influenced but not determined by environment, will continue to fight for programs that will encourage able students in their quest for more knowledge.

Final words: This author believes that Oakes has a valid claim when she states that lower track classes characteristically have poor quality of instruction, and poor student performance. However, her claim that ". . . the existence of special programs or classes for gifted students in a school often creates a culture wherein less is expected of and provided for those who don't qualify" (Oakes, 1990), is illogical. Lowered expectations are caused by teachers who are disinterested in teaching and stimulating students with average and below average IQs, not by the existence of programs for the gifted. Teachers can teach students at any ability level using creative instructional methods, teaching critical thinking, and using outside resources to stimulate the learning process. These things are not limited just to programs of the gifted and talented as Oakes seems to believe. This author knows many teachers who use these procedures in their regular classes every day, encouraging their students to new heights, and creating an environment where learning is a joy. Granted, there are flaws in the process of educating the gifted, and educators of the gifted constantly are striving to eliminate them. However, there are flaws in <u>every</u> facet of education. Minorities are overrepresented in special education, test scores are declining nation wide, testing procedures used in identification of all students has not been perfected, and funding for education is not a priority. However, the elimination of gifted programs

is not a panacea for the problems in the field of education. The solution is simple - employ teachers that are excited about teaching. Teachers that are excited about teaching want the best for their students and strive to give it to them. This includes using quality teaching methods, making the most out of materials (available to all the teachers in a building), and looking for ways to improve the environment of the classroom with the support of the administration. Every classroom has the potential to be a place where students are excited and motivated about learning whether it is a gifted classroom or a classroom of average students.

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